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SUBJECT: THICH QUANG DO COMES TO DINNER

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Venerable Thich Quang Do, President of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, attended a small dinner hosted by the Consul General July 10 -- despite the monk's ongoing pagoda arrest. He welcomed the opportunity to talk at length about the need for political change in Vietnam and was clearly enjoying the company. We had informed the External Relations Office about the invitation prior to the event. The GVN sent a police escort but made no attempt to prevent Thich Quang Do's attendance. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The Consul General extended an invitation for dinner to Thich Quang Do, President of the UBCV and his aide Thich Vien Dinh, Vice-President and General Secretary of the UBCV. Also in attendance were British Consul General Deborah Clarke and Kim Depenham from the Australian Consulate. (Invitations were declined by the EU Commission, Finnish EU presidency and French Embassy, all in Hanoi.) CG Winnick informed ERO Director Le Quoc Hung about the invitation in mid-June; Hung protested the idea at that time, but no other GVN comments were communicated to us. Two days prior to the dinner, Poloff alerted ERO about the time and place of the dinner. On July 10, Poloff and Pol/Econ specialist met Thich Quang Do and Thich Vien Dinh at their pagodas and escorted them to the CG Residence. Aside from the follow car of government minders the dinner took place without interference.

13. (SBU) Over the course of three hours, Thich Quang Do explained UBCV concerns and objectives as follows:

-- The majority of Vietnamese are starved for change in the political system. They want a multiparty system and an end to the Communist Party's monopoly on power, and are looking to international community to push for this change.

-- Vietnam has had the same single-party system for sixty years and the CPV will never give up its exclusive power. Just before the Tenth Party Congress, there was some hope for change when the CPV asked for public comment on its draft political report, but the loosening never quite materialized. For example, the GVN has prohibited public gatherings of more than five people.

-- The UBCV hopes the U.S. will use WTO and PNTR to encourage the GVN to become more democratic, i.e. by setting up a multi-party system before WTO entry and the granting of PNTR.

-- Examples of how WTO and APEC are making GVN show more apparent openness and tolerance are GVN reactions to new democratic movements. The 8406 Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam has not resulted in any crackdowns by GVN on this movement or its leader Father Nguyen Van Ly.

-- Another example of the GVN movement toward apparent openness is its toleration, thus far, of the Democratic Party of Vietnam.

This kind of openness needs to be nurtured.

-- However, the GVN show of openness is a front. Once APEC ends and PNTR is granted, the GVN will return to its normal operations and roll back any democratic gains. In fact, the GVN is continuing its repressive acts in more subtle ways. For instance, when the Democratic Party was reestablished the police set up blocks around Hoang Minh Chinh's home. The Democratic Party of Vietnam, so long as it remains alive, is a threat to the Communist Party.

-- In regards to the 8406 group, TQD said that the GVN allowed the Manifesto to be issued because it helped to show that Vietnam is more open; and also the manifesto served to identify GVN opponents. He noted that among the 8406 members, there are likely to be some fake dissidents and provocateurs. TQD put more stock in the DPV and its members.

-- Social conditions in Vietnam are the worst in 1000 years of Vietnamese history. Mothers sell their babies and Vietnamese girls are forced into marriages in Taiwan while GVN officials bet millions of dollars on soccer games, prostitution is rising and Vietnamese have to look for work as contract labor abroad.

-- The Communist Party would not have to dissolve under a multi-party system. It could exist among other parties and, in fact, would be in a good position because its leaders have experience governing. The problem is they have had too many exclusive benefits for too long.

-- Another concern for the future of Vietnam is the expansion of China into Southeast Asia. The GVN and PRC are linked by ideology, but each has its own interests. The U.S. and the EU are concerned about Chinese expansion and see support for Vietnam, even with the current regime, as a bulwark against Chinese expansion. By the same token, TQD stated that GVN has to balance between these two forces - China and the West. However, there is no need for Vietnam to fear China, especially

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so long as the U.S. and EU provide continuing support for democracy.

-- China's leaders do not want Vietnam to become democratic, because they understand that if the Vietnamese people have democracy, the Chinese people will demand it as well.

-- TQD demonstrated a powerful sense of nationalism in his distrust of China. He faulted the GVN for not advancing Vietnamese interests in countering China's influence.

-- The draft law on associations does not hold much promise for democracy because if GVN determines any association to be dangerous, it will put a stop to it. The existence of Fatherland Front is another way the GVN will continue to control organizations. TQD cited himself as an example, saying he would never be allowed to lead an organization.

-- The UBCV is aware of GVN suggestions that it register under a different name and without TQD and Thich Huyen Quang, or that the UBCV and the official VBS might merge. The UBCV was willing to support a merger if the merged entity were not part of the Fatherland Front. The GVN would never permit this.

-- The UBCV has established UBCV provincial boards in ten provinces with varying numbers of members. The GVN has unsuccessfully tried to dissolve these boards (only I can dissolve them, TQD said) but the GVN has been able to block their operations.

14. (SBU) Thich Quang Do also informed us about the conditions of his pagoda arrest. He stated he does not have visitors except for a few UBCV monks because "no one else dares" to visit him. He only leaves the pagoda to see his doctor monthly to monitor his diabetes. He stated he is reluctant to attempt to visit other pagodas because the police will then question and threaten

the monks there. In February he attempted to visit Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang, but he only made it to the train station before being forcibly returned to his pagoda. He noted, however, that he is able to communicate with the Patriarch through other means and that he also communicates with the International Buddhist Information Bureau in Paris through friends who send messages on his behalf. He spends most of his time in his room and is served his meals there. He can move around the pagoda but cannot teach, preside over services, or participate in ceremonies. He chuckled in recounting how a policeman was always on hand during services to ensure that he could not grab the microphone.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: TQD's positions were consistent with our previous meetings with him in his room at the pagoda. The remarkable aspect of the dinner was that it occurred at all, and with little fuss by the authorities. Although Thich Quang Do predicts a clampdown following the GVN's achievement of its objectives, the more normal expanded political space becomes, the harder it will be to backtrack. (Frankly, we expected more pushback from the GVN. The only sign of nervousness came on the morning of July 4 when the ERO called us in for a final assurance that no dissidents would be attending our national day reception this year. As it turned out, the GVN sent HCMC Chairman, Politburo member and just-elected Party Secretary Le Thanh Hai as its senior representative along with chairmen of seven nearby provinces.)

¶6. (SBU) Comment, continued: Thich Quang Do's strong support for a multiparty system and an end to the Communist Party's "dictatorship" shows his resolute opposition to the GVN. He has been consistent with this message. However, he is beginning to acknowledge the existence of emerging democratic movements as a possible indicator of change. He clearly sees his hope for a more democratic Vietnam as dependent on the international community, specifically the U.S. and EU. End Comment.
WINNICK